The Waldorf High School

Excerpted from *Understanding Waldorf Education: Teaching from the Inside Out* by Jack Petrash

"After all, the function of education is to turn out an integrated individual who is capable of dealing with life..."
--J. Krishnamurti

It is a typical high school day, the kind that takes place every spring in hundreds of schools across America. Classes have been over for several hours and the school is remarkably quiet and empty. The only activity inside the building is that which involves the cleaning staff.

Out in the parking lot behind the school, the baseball team is unloading the van, having just returned from an away game. As the coach, I stand with the players as we put away the balls, the bats and the batting helmets. Our catcher is still unloading his own gear, a large bag that contains his chest protector, shin guards, and mask. He is a senior, and is one of those unique players who evoke a mixture of awe and envy in opposing teams, an all-met player whose homeruns and leadership will eventually lead our team to the final four in our state tournament.

As he reaches into the van for his equipment, he begins to sing beautifully and I stop in surprise. He is singing opera and I am immediately struck by the confluence of his talents -- his athletic ability and his unique artistic sensibility. I think to myself: "How many coaches in America have a left-handed, power-hitting catcher who lapses into "Don Giovanni" at the end of a long day?

This experience provided yet another of those moments when I could clearly see the value of a Waldorf education. This young man embodied the results of the three-dimensional approach to education.

Good Habits of Mind

In high school this three-dimensional paradigm continues to be the guiding educational principle. Waldorf high school students are engaged through the week actively, emotionally and thoughtfully, just as they were in their earlier education. However, during this third phase of a young person's education, the emphasis in a Waldorf high school moves decidedly toward thinking, which is developed through the types of subjects that are taught and through the habits of mind that are cultivated.

The maturation process that occurs in high school students plays an important role in determining which habits of mind will be cultivated during the four years. According to Douglas Gerwin, the director of the Waldorf High School Training in New Hampshire, each high school year should present a unique question to the students. These underlying questions have important purpose, to awaken specific aspects of human intelligence.

> Ninth grade students are summoned to exercise powers of exact observation: in the sciences, to describe and draw precisely what happened in the lab experiments and demonstrations; in the humanities, to recount clearly a sequence of events or the nature of a character without getting lost in the confusion of details. The objective here is to train in the student powers of exact observation and reflection so they can experience in the raging storm of phenomena around them the steady ballast of their own thinking...One may summarize the approach of this freshman curriculum with the seminal question: What? What happened? What is going on here? What did you see and hear? (Gerwin, 1997, p. 12)

Gerwin goes on to say that in tenth grade, observation is expanded to include comparison and the question of "What?" is replaced with "How?" How are acids different from bases? How are men different from women? How do cultural and religious traditions from the Middle East and the Far East differ from those in the West?

Eleventh grade develops powers of analysis and abstraction. Gerwin continues:

> The junior year curriculum could be characterized by a theme of invisibility: namely the study of those subjects that draw the student into areas that are not accessible to the experience of our senses...In chemistry, the students enter the invisible kingdom of the atom; in physics they explore the invisible world of electricity (which we can see only in its effects, not in its inherent nature)...These voyages to the invisible landscapes pose a central question intended to strengthen the student's powers of independent analysis and abstract theorizing. The question is "Why? Why are things this way?" (Gerwin 1997, p. 13, 14).

Although the development of thinking is certainly not completed in the high school and will continue in college and in life, the twelfth grade is a time to step back and observe the whole. Synthesis becomes the habit of mind that is trained as the students are asked to broaden their view and see their subjects as part of a whole curriculum. The curriculum poses the questions -- "How do I see the world in a non-fragmented way?" "Is there meaning in life?" and finally, "Who am I?" These are presented to the seniors as they look back on their years of study. These questions are raised repeatedly, particularly in the literature study of the transcendentalists, with Emerson's "Self Reliance," Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" and with Emily Dickinson's poem, "The Inner from the Outer."

Keeping those underlying questions in mind, teachers help to develop powers of discernment, enabling students to look closely at the world in which they live and at themselves. The ability to observe, compare, analyze and synthesize helps young people better understand the world they are inheriting and at the same time, prepares them for finding their place in the world. Because Waldorf education requires inner responsiveness on the part of the students, graduates leave school with a clearer sense of who they are and what they believe to be important, making it possible for them to give direction in their own lives.

In-Depth Study

To develop good habits of mind, schools create learning situations that encourage students to explore subjects deeply, going beyond a superficial understanding. This requires a more intensive focus and in-depth study.

Tod Sizer, the founder of the Coalition for Essential Schools at Brown University, contends that it is not effective to try and cover all the material specified in high school curricula because such attempts to teach all areas of study lead only to a smorgasbord of superficial instruction. "My basic conclusion is contained in the aphorism 'less is more." I believe that the qualities of mind that should be the goal of high school need time to grow and that they develop best when engaging a few, important ideas, deeply" (Sizer, 1992 p. 89).

Rather than sampling a wide range of diverse material, Waldorf schools choose to delve deeply into selected areas in an effort to provide their students with a more substantive understanding. The main lesson classes that are taught in the high school take place in an hour and forty minute "double" period at the beginning of each school day over the span of three to four weeks. This "block scheduling," which is also a school reform used in mainstream education in both high schools and colleges, is an organizational feature well suited to in-depth study. A dozen subjects are studied in this way over the course of each year. These subjects come from all disciplines ranging from science and math to the humanities and are taught in an intensive, concentrated manner.

Truth, Beauty and Goodness

The subjects that a school elects to offer express the values of its institution and/or its school system. This is certainly the case in the Waldorf high school, which subscribes to a value-laden approach, one similar in sentiment to what Howard Gardner expresses in his book, The Disciplined MInd: "an education for all human beings needs to explore in some depth a set of key human achievements capture in the venerable phrase "the true, the beautiful and the good" (Gardner, H., 2000, p. 19).

For Rudolf Steiner, the experience of truth, beauty and goodness was an essential aspect of what children should receive in school. This also is an apt way to describe what Waldorf high school students will encounter through the curriculum. The subjects that are taught can essentially be organized around these ideals.

Truth

High school students actively take up a search for truth. Math and science subjects such as Boolean Algebra, Permutations and Probability, Geology, Optics or Zoology provide necessary understandings about the tangible world and foster the mental acuity needed for this exploration. But a search for truth is also a personal quest for each individual student. That is why teenagers begin to question adults rather than simply to ask questions. A search for truth inevitably requires that both students and teachers are able to suspend personal beliefs and for an extended period of time entertain other points of view. Today, more than ever, issues are rarely so clear as to be one sided. High school teachers must help students develop the habit of considering issues from various points of view.

History teaching in the high school can further this effort by presenting many sides of an issue. With the Civil War, for instance, students can understand both the outrage of northern abolitionists and the “love of place” that motivated Virginians and especially Robert E. Lee. Students need to experience the worry and danger of the Underground Railroad, as well as the apprehension and pain of the battlefield, the sadness and discouragement of Abraham Lincoln, Daniel Webster, or even Jefferson Davis, and the heartache of the mothers and wives back home. They should know the desolation and shock of the people of Georgia as Sherman made his “March to the Sea” and they should comprehend as well the disappointment caused by the assassination of Lincoln. Young people must see that event with clear issues, a search for truth is complicated and time consuming, but always worth the effort.

Beauty

The Waldorf curriculum also provides its high school students with the opportunity to consider timeless beauty. In freshman and sophomore year, the study of Art History, a two-part survey course, enables the students to experience, know, and recreate works of lasting artistic value. The eleventh-grade study of the History of Music offers the same opportunity, as does the senior-year study of the History of Architecture. All of these courses underscore the importance of beauty and place it in the context of human history.

Goodness

High school students also need an experience of the good. The National Association of Secondary School Principles (NASSP) states in its report, Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution, “that schools must unabashedly teach students about key virtues...Some educators may feel uncomfortable about accepting this assignment, but we believe certain enduring virtues are universal to principled Americans. In an era where children are killing children and children are giving birth to children, high schools cannot afford to shirk this duty” (NASSP 1996a, p. 30).

Value-laden instruction is a complicated matter fraught with a wide array of difficulties, but one that cannot be avoided. Although it is often fruitless to provide direct instruction about virtue, examples of individuals from history and literature who have wrestled with moral questions enable students to explore and define their own beliefs. In high school, the main lesson in Dante’s Inferno brings students face to face with the conflict of Good and Evil. In the study of the epic tale, Parsifal, the role of personal moral responsibility is explored. And the reading of Victor Hugo’s classic novel, Les Miserables, the possibility of human transformation is viewed through the character of Jean Valjean. Other books such as the Upanishads or the Bhagavad Gita are used in a Waldorf high school because they raise serious ethical questions, ones that encourage students to consider goodness as an ideal that is worthy of our attention as truth and beauty.

The Pedagogy at Work

In a freshman class at Oberlin College in Ohio, students are receiving an unexpected and rather surprising assignment. The professor tells them that he is going to collect their notes at the start of the next day's class. After a flurry of gasps and groans, one student asks, "Which notes?"

"Your class notes," the professor replies.

"But which class notes?" the student responds, "The ones I take each day or the ones that I rewrite at night?"

Now it is the professor who is surprised. "Who told you that I was going to collect your notes?"

"No one," the student rejoins, "this is the way I was taught to take notes."

"Where did you go to school?" the professor asks skeptically.

The student answers, "A small school on Long Island, the Waldorf School."

"Oh, that explains it," the professor replies, satisfied at last.

The value of the Waldorf educational philosophy should be evident in its ability to put educational principles into practice. One way to assess if this is indeed being done effectively would be to examine the Waldorf program in the light on commonly accepted educational criteria.

The late Ernest Boyer, former Commissioner of Education, Chancellor of the State University of New York, and president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, took part in an extensive study of secondary education in America and proposed that high schools should strive to meet four essential goals.

> First, the high school should help all students develop the capacity to think critically and communicate effectively through a mastery of language.
>
> Second, the high school should help all students learn about themselves, the human heritage, and the interdependent world in which they live through a core curriculum based upon consequential human experiences common to all people.
>
> Third, the high school should prepare all students for work and further education through a program of electives that develop individual aptitudes and interests.
>
> Fourth, the high school should help all students fulfill their social and civic obligations through school and community service (Boyer, 1983, p. 66-67)

These four goals provide a viable way to measure the soundness of the Waldorf approach to high school education.

Communicating Clear Thinking through the Mastery of Language

With regard to the first of Boyer's goals, the section of this chapter that discusses good habits of mind (pages 84-87) shows that Waldorf high schools offer a comprehensive approach to the development of critical thinking. What has not been stated explicitly, however, is the role that the mastery of written and spoken language plays in that process.

Each high school student writes, on the average, three compositions each week. These pieces vary in type from experiment observations, to informative descriptions, to narrative accounts, essays, research projects and literary interpretations. Almost all of these compositions will become the text of the student's main lesson books, accounts of the material studied in each of the dozen or so main lesson blocks of the year. These books contain the essential information from the lessons and serve as a textbook to the students.

In addition to providing continuous opportunities for writing, the extended main lesson format encourages classroom discourse, requiring students to express their ideas orally through the regular review of the previous day's work and through discussion of new material. In each instance, the school supports the students in the delicate process of ascertaining and giving voice to their own thoughts.

Understanding Our Human Heritage

With regards to the second of the Carnegie Foundation's goals, it is clear that Waldorf schools' approach is decidedly "humanistic." An understanding of "human heritage" is placed at the forefront of the Waldorf program. Ancient cultures from Asia, Africa and the Americas, from Buddha and Lao Tzu to the Bushmen of the Kalahari and the Native Sioux, are all considered from the point of view of their wisdom, faith and insight. At the same time, our modern civilization and its current and sometimes tragic events are also examined at length. In this way the Waldorf high school is able to blend two essential considerations noted by Howard Gardner in his recent book, The Disciplined Mind: "We need an education that is deeply rooted in two apparently contrasting but actually complementary considerations: what is known about the human condition in its timeless aspects; and what is known about the pressures and challenges and opportunities of the contemporary scene" (Gardner, 2000 p. 20).

Preparing Students for the Future –Elective Courses

As a young graduate student in education, I visited a local Waldorf school and saw a display of work from high school students. I remember pausing in front of a table and staring at a red flannel shirt that one of the senior boys had sewn, and a beautifully drawn skeleton of a horse in his biology main lesson book, and then at a large exquisite stained glass project and a beautiful piece of calligraphy. I had a bachelor's degree and was on the verge of completing my masters, but I lacked the abilities that this high school student had. I knew it and I felt shortchanged. But I also knew immediately that this was the type of school in which I wanted to teach.

Because the three-dimensional paradigm matters as much in the high school as it does in the preschool and grade school, all students take a combination of classes that require manual skill and artistic ability, as well as academic understanding. Courses such as choral singing, stone sculpture and eurthymy (a form of movement set to music or speech that was developed by Rudolf Steiner and taught at most Waldorf schools) are required courses for all students because they are essential in developing well-rounded individuals.

Within a framework of a balanced education students are encourage to choose electives, which can range from the highly technical subjects (robotics) to the most basic (blacksmithing), and from the 21st century with computer graphics and web design to madrigal singing, 18th century chamber music, or an in-depth consideration of the Civil Rights Movement or Darwin's Origin of the Species. These choices are not necessarily career track electives, but they do allow students to follow their interests, deepen their understanding, and perfect their skills.

Social and Civic Responsibility

Anyone who spends time with American high school students cannot help but notice a striking degree of self-centeredness. Teenagers are, by nature, self-conscious and self-involved. When affluence is added to the mix, it exacerbates the situation further. For that reason, Waldorf schools, like so many other schools across the country, have institutionalized service programs to help young people acquire social awareness and demonstrate social responsibility.

Service-based construction programs like Habitat for Humanity or Christmas in April are often popular with Waldorf schools because they provide hands-on, concrete ways to help. With supervision and materials provided by local construction companies, high school students are able to spend weekend time making repairs and painting the homes of the elderly, the disabled and the less-fortunate.

Another opportunity for social service is found at local soup kitchens. Waldorf high school students often perform their service as a class, going to a local shelter together to prepare and serve lunch several times during the school year. This arrangement provides an important opportunity, enabling students to transform their idealism and concern into action – in short, to think globally but act locally.

Working locally is equally important when it comes to environmental issues. Waldorf students need to be aware of environmental issues in their school, not just in the rain forest.

Student government should be involved in school decisions on paper use, nutritional and packaging issues concerning lunch, and the recycling of cardboard, plastic, and aluminum. These small decisions are important because they help Waldorf students experience the conflict between our ideals and our own personal convenience.

Small is Beautiful

Waldorf high schools do more than an adequate job of meeting the educational goals set forth by the Carnegie Foundation in its study of American high schools. And yet, concerns are not uncommon.

Perhaps the most common criticism directed at Waldorf high schools has centered on size. Parents, students, and even teachers have at times felt the schools are too small. Typical enrollments of approximately 100 students change social interactions in a variety of ways, including the dramatic experience of school spirit prevalent at large high school sporting events, and the traditional high school scene with large cafeterias, well-equipped gymnasiums, and large groups of students.

Smaller budgets mean fewer faculty members, and students miss the possibility of having new teachers year after year. Housed on the same campus and often in the same building as the preschool and the grade school, Waldorf students often complain about the familiarity of being in the same place and with the same students and teachers for 12 to 14 years. The perception is that small is a disadvantage, but according to a recent study of American high schools by the National Association of Secondary School principals, this is not the case.

> During much of this century, reformers sought to shut small high schools and herd youngsters into ever larger schools that styled themselves after the factory model. Experts perceived bigness as a sine qua non of excellence. This paradigm, with its vast array of offerings, represented the epitome of educational progress. But students are not pieces on an assembly line and knowledge is not an inert commodity to pour into vessels like soft drink syrup at a bottling plant. The impersonal nature of high school leaves too many youngsters alienated from the learning process (NASSP, 1996b, p. 11).

Clearly the “weakness” of the Waldorf high school is also its strength. The familiarity that makes young people feel uncomfortable also makes them members of a community. It insures that they are known and cared for and that changes in their behavior and appearance do not go unnoticed.

This insightful passage by Theodore Sizer from his book*, Horace’s Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School,* clearly shows the anonymity that students seek.

> Her name was Melissa. She entered the classroom alone…Looking at no one in particular. Melissa headed toward a desk to the teacher’s left, against the wall…She said nothing to her neighbors, but seemed at ease with them and they wilt her. She looked about her, neither pleasantly or unpleasantly, with no particular recognition, enthusiasm, curiosity or hostility…Melissa watched all…without animation. Her face was not blank, quite; there was an ennui, acceptance, a trace of wariness. A question was directed to her. She looked at the teacher with little change in expression. A pause. I don’t understand. (The teacher) repeated the question, kindly, without reproach. Another pause. I don’t know…Melissa speaking slowly said something, a phrase using words earlier spoken during the teacher’s lecture. It was enough to end the exchange, but not enough to provoke a counterquestion or a follow up by a teacher.

> Melissa, however unwittingly, was a master of non-engagement. She sat at the side. She didn't move much, thus drawing attention to herself. She did not offer ideas to the class, and when questioned answered with something just plausible and relevant enough to avoid being chided for inattention…She was an educational artful dodger with considerable skill…I could imagine Melissa moving through her entire school day in (this) fashion (Sizer, 1984, p. 161-2).

This non-engagement is a challenge to teachers. Many students in high schools across the country slip by disengaged with only a modicum of effort, and no one notices. In contrast, Waldorf high schools discourage anonymity. When a teacher instructs approximately 100 different students each year as opposed to 300, she is able to notice the quiet, disengaged student and intervene. Students cannot avoid responsiveness when they sit in smaller classes, face to face with an attentive teacher who has known them and possibly their siblings for an extended period of time. More so, when a team of high school teachers with many eyes and a variety of perspectives meets regularly to discuss the students as Waldorf teachers do each week, the students' needs become more clear to everyone. This underscores the notion that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Schools need to meet the boys and girls such as Melissa who reside on the periphery, but they also need to confront the students who are overly assertive and aggressive. Every high school has its bullies, both girls and boys. Some are physical, some verbal, and some practice emotional intimidation. These students can prove just as elusive as quiet students because they hide behind their peers and behind a persona of potential defiance. In large schools the crowd obscures these students, but in small schools they are painfully obvious.

Balanced Development in the High School

In either case, the teachers hold the key to the students' ability to change through direct contact with these students. It takes a great deal of effort on the part of the teacher to intervene successfully to affect change. In a Waldorf high school, however, the three-dimensional paradigm supports that effort.

The non-engaged student and the overly assertive are lacking balanced development. The non-engaged student lacks involvement, that volitional aspect that is cultivated in the Waldorf school from the earliest years. Active involvement, or will development, is the basis of the preschool program as well as a key component of the grade school. It must continue to be fostered in the high school as well through movement and artistic work, classroom participation, and extracurricular activities.

In the Waldorf high school program, where sports teams and dramatic productions accept all students rather than offering tryouts, the opportunity for activity and involvement increases. Perceptive teachers can see the long-distance runner in the solitary student or exceptional basketball ability in the seemingly unathletic, quiet girl who can apply her unwavering focus, dedication and intelligence to a one-on-one defense. When these students are encouraged and supported to explore new abilities in unfamiliar situations, they grow in confidence. But, most of all, these active experiences strike at the root of non-engagement. However, these changes cannot happen without an advocate. That is why many Waldorf high schools provide a personal advisor for each high school student.

In a similar way, the aggressive student is lacking in balanced development. In this instance it is the emotional aspect that is undeveloped. With bullies, sensitivity, consideration, and compassion, are all strikingly absent. These students form critical judgments about their classmates and teacher and often manifest these negative judgments in unfortunate actions, actions that can be heartless and cruel. It is emotional engagement that is missing or distorted in what they do. And this is precisely what needs to be encouraged in high school. It is not uncommon that artistic ability sleeps within the aggressive student. Musical ability, dramatic ability, and visual artistic talent often reside in the most challenging and aggressive students.

> *"I shall create. If not a note, a hole. If not an overture, a desecration."*
> --Gwendolyn Brookes (speaking about an angry adolescent) (Brookes, 1987)

When high school programs require all students to be artistically engaged it is easier for difficult students to find an artistic outlet for their frustrations. These students often have latent talents that have gone unnoticed. When

an advisor can look closely and with sufficient insight to recognize the musical or dramatic ability that has gone undeveloped in a difficult student, it can clear the way for healing and positive change.

That is not just a Waldorf understanding. Educators nationwide have recognized the arts as an invaluable tool for helping young people find direction in their lives. Author Bill Shore points this out in his recent book, *The Cathedral Within: Transforming your Life by Giving Something Back.*

> The Chicago Children's Choir (is) the largest choral and performance training group of its kind in the United States. As much as (its director) Nancy Carstedt loves music, that is not the focal point of her work. Her work is about saving children's lives. She succeeds at it by letting kids into a world they've never imagined, exposing them to discipline and commitment and excellence…and by doing whatever is necessary to enable them to create and experience excellence themselves…The choir is multiracial, multicultural, and, like any choir, harmony is its business (Shore, 1999, p. 79).

On the other hand, when high school programs ignore arts education, the results can be disastrous. This was underscored by the late music educator, Charles Fowler. "My observations in schools are that drugs, crime, indifference and insensitivity tend to run rampant in schools that deprive students of instruction in the arts" (Fowler, 1996, p. 12, 13).

Restoring Balance

When Waldorf teachers work with challenging students, they proceed on two levels: They deal with problematic behavior and then they invariably turn to the root cause of the problem. Almost always, the difficulties that are uncovered indicate a one-sided and incomplete development of the three essential capacities – thinking, feeling and willing – that are at the heart of Waldorf education. This incomplete development occurs for a variety of reasons – mis-education, difficulties in the home, or a physiological problem – but in any case it requires a high school teacher's unwavering dedication to restore balance through teaching.

This is the same educational ideal that not only shapes the work of the high school, but of all three phases of Waldorf education – preschool, grade school, and high school. The fundamental understanding is that a student's healthy development must be fostered by an education that is heartfelt and hands-on as well as academic. It is only through a well-balanced approach to teaching that we can help students realize all that they can do and help them to become adults who can realize their full human potential.

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